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ABSTRACT

This report chronicles the first Society of Magazine Editors' educators seminar, which was held in New York from May 13-17, 1974, and was attended by ten journalism faculty. The industry's concerns, as expressed through editors, are paper, printing, postage, people, and profit. The Magazine Publishers Association (MPA) seems mostly concerned with Washington lobbying activities about postal rates, while studying alternative forms of distribution. MPA seemed to believe higher magazine subscription prices were inevitable, and though lower sales would result, so would higher profits. Highlights of the visit and discussion with individual editors of each shop are described. Two final points are reinforced: successful magazines are run by businessmen or women first and editors second; and the best editors have strong personalities which pervade their operation and product. Most faculty participants expressed satisfaction with the initial seminar and encouraged others to attend future sessions. (Author/RB)

magazines
by John W. English

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The Lives and Hard Times of Magazine Editors in the Big Apple: A Report on the ASME Educators Seminar

Any attempt to distill 40 hours of intense discussion into a brief report will obviously require a judicious selection of specific facts and general impressions. In an effort to do this, let me say at the outset, that I believe the first journalism educators seminar, sponsored by the American Society of Magazine Editors, was clearly considered a success by the 10 journalism faculty who attended and is highly recommended to anyone teaching magazine journalism, if future sessions are scheduled. Much of the credit for the pilot project, held May 13-17 in New York, must go to its originator and organizer, Robert E. Kenyon Jr., who has just retired as secretary of ASME, and, of course, the participating editors themselves.

At times during the week-long series of sessions, one felt the pace of faces and places seemed too fast to absorb and evaluate all the news and views. Just to record all the information and ideas presented required nearly two stenographer's notebooks, not to mention more than 10 pounds of complimentary back issues, brochures and surveys. What follows, then, are my distilled notes and impressions--I won't pretend to speak for my other colleagues. I will also state, though I'm sure it will be revealed, that I was most interested in the editorial side of magazines since I teach magazine article writing and am an active free lance.

One other preface note seems significant. On the weekend prior to the ASME seminar, the A.J. Liebling Counter-Convention for the working press was held in New York. In retrospect, the contrast between the two media-oriented events revealed a wide disparity of concerns: at Liebling, the journalists expressed an idealistic fervor for standards and a quality editorial package. Editors, however, seemed more concerned with the practical aspects of putting out a magazine, always with an eye

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on the bottom line of the budget. The industry concerns might best be summarized by McGraw-Hill's nifty 5-P formula: "paper, printing, postage and people welded together into profit." The emphasis, then, was on "how to" rather than the "whys" of the magazine world.

At the opening session at the Magazine Center, staff executives outlined the Magazine Publishers Associations's activities. Stephen Kelly said MPA membership was limited to publishers whose product would "be welcome on the desk of a senator." Kelly, who seemed preoccupied with lobbying in Washington against postal increases, called the May congressional vote to phase-in the planned 150 per cent rate hike "a partial victory." He also said alternative channels of magazine distribution were being both considered and tested and seemed more attractive each time the rates went up. Robert Goshorn said the MPA's operative philosophy was that the dissemination of information and ideas through magazines was for the public good and, therefore, postal rates should be subsidized. He argued that if the post office was set up in 1879 to serve this public need, it is even more important to continue it now. Goshorn warned that postal rate increases must be passed on to subscribers, which will not be in the public interest. He said while postal costs represent only about 10 per cent of a magazine's cost, "precipitous increases" enacted in 1970, are causing this portion to increase at a rate faster than other costs. The eight alternative forms of magazine delivery that MAP is considering are: 1. quasi-mail corporations already in operation, 2. wholesalers with a stake in magazines' survival, 3. use of those who deliver samples door to door, 4. use of other delivery men, 5. use of newspaper boys, 6. delivery to a mid-point where subscribers go to pick up their copy, 7. a coupon redemption plan where subscribers pick up their copy from a newsstand, and 8. other entrepreneurs. In the four test runs conducted so far, none of the alternate approaches were able to deliver the product at a cost comparable to the U.S. Mail, which has 50 million drops every day, Goshorn said. One

money-saving technique is being pursued: using computers to do a better pre-sort so magazines will be delivered to the post office by routes.

On the paper problem, Goshorn said there was "no basic paper shortage, it's a dollar shortage." In comparing the paper manufacturers to the oil companies, he said, "Demand is catching up with supply. Higher grades of paper, which net higher profit for manufacturers, are being continued and poorer grades dropped. They now tell you what kind of paper is available and what you'll pay for it."

The MPA position is that although higher magazine prices will mean lower sales, readers will inevitably have to pay more for the product in order to maintain profits, he added.

Woman's Day was the first stop on the tour of magazine offices and editor Geraldine Rhoads explained her formula for success: no subscriptions--sell only in retail outlets; offer content that will help readers with daily problems of basics--food, shelter, money and sex--in a way that television can't compete with; and reinforce the readers' goals. "Readers identify with a magazine as their alter ego," Ms. Rhoads said. "We don't want them to change much but can influence them and don't think there's a woman who reads our magazine who doesn't have a new self esteem." She believes the best test of a magazine is sales and with 8 million monthly trails only TV Guide and Readers Digest.

She said the magazine is mostly written by free lancers who have to write articles that engage the readers' interest in a problem and offer solutions as well as "break the boredom barrier." Ms. Rhoads, who makes all the final decisions on articles herself, cited the challenge of editing as "having to know not only what the reader is thinking ans saying now, but where they are going in six months." She added that her editorial budget of $3 million last year was about 10 percent of the total publishing budget.

Another successful women's magazine editor and equally strong personality is Ruth Whitney of Glamour, which touts itself as the largest selling fashion magazine in the world with the largest number of advertising pages in the field. Ms. Whitney, who does use monthly planning sessions to formulate the content (Ms. Rhoads doesn't), said her current mix included only 40 percent fashion and more on politics, sex and health. She said payment for the 4 or 5 free lance contributions she uses each month runs to $2000. Ms. Whitney said Conde Nast does monthly readership surveys of 1000 readers to help shape the editorial content. When readers are asked, "Tell us what you want from us," the responses are how-to articles on beauty, travel and at-home advice.

Edith Locke, editor of Mademoiselle, like others in the Conde Nast group, has a precisely defined reading audience: women 18 to 25, mostly in their early 20s; 22 percent are in college and the majority of the rest are single and working. (Denise Otis, of House and Garden, described her readers as in the mid-30s to 50 age bracket, who live in custom-built homes in the suburbs.) Ms. Locke said an editor should be surrounded by people like her readers and listen to them. She said 75 percent of her staff was under 30 and that she was always looking for talented new writers. She said her biggest problem as editor was to get artists and writers to meet deadlines.

In a session on production, Conde Nast's Tom Cooke said a new photoengraving machine would again increase the use of color because 4-color plates could be produced in a few hours from what now takes 10 days. He also said nylon press plates would soon replace the preformed aluminum shells now being used.

B.H. Yount, the circulation wizard, revealed that the largest portion of subscriptions came from direct mail solicitation and subscription agencies but that the most profitable subscriptions were from insert cards in newstand copies and renewals. He also stated that Glamour was on sale in 75,000 out of 103,000 available newsstands

in the U.S. and Canada and that he did a survey of 160 agencies twice a year to determine newsstand sales. Yount emphasized the importance of a good cover on newsstand "impulse sales." His criteria are: high color to attract attention; subject matter that has general appeal (which translates "usually just a pretty girl smiling which doesn't offend anyone") and no modeling of fashions which do not appeal. Each month the Conde Nast editors present their cover suggestions to Yount for his counsel. He is adamant that the formula works and a review of sales figures apparently confirms that belief. The editors rarely deviate from his advice, according to three years worth of covers tacked up in Ms. Locke's office. Newsstand sales have doubled in the last 10 years, Yount proudly says, "Only in 1958 and 1970 when the young rebelled against fashion, did the sales drop."

In a hastily scheduled meeting, the seminar participants visited with three editors of black magazines: Essence, Encore and Black Enterprise, who made the case for the 20 magazines oriented toward black readers. "We try to celebrate black women and what they're doing now, create positive images," said Essence's Marcia Gillespie. "More quality magazines are needed for sophisticated black professionals," added Encore's Lynn Sharp. "Ebony's formula of the 1940s and 50s only appeals to an older, less well educated and with lower income audience." The education of black students for journalism dominated most of the breakfast session.

Predictably professional smugness was the tenor of the Time-Life Inc. session. "Free lancers or outsiders can't do the thorough research required (on our articles), said Fortune editor Robert Lubar. "It may be cheaper to use free lancers but we can't can't get the consistent quality." Lubar outlined Fortune's editorial production approach, a system in which the writer is given one assignment and time to do it well, a formula that he says hasn't yet been copied by anyone else. The writer usually has four weeks to research and write an article of 5,000 to 6,000 words. He begins by checking the morgue and talking to big names in the field to get educated and to get

leads to other specialists. "I find myself reading less and less," one Fortune writer confessed. "Once I find the key people I read only what they suggest, especially if I think I can quote from it."

The researcher-reporter half of the writer-researcher team turns out reports on the assigned subject, reads the financial reports involved and fact-checks the finished story. Linda Martin, one reporter-researcher, said her work on the Equity Funding fraud story required trips to Washington, D.C., and Los Angeles for three weeks, 40 two-hour interviews and preparing 300 pages of notes. "When the writer finished his piece, I was given 10,000 words to check. There is an incredible emphasis on accuracy here," she said.

Sports Illustrated's John Tibby described the seven options for the Hank Aaron story formulated by the editors before the season began and how it was finally handled. He said S.I. was dedicated to fast color and that final deadline for a Tuesday press run was 1 a.m. Monday, but that the magazine is normally put together about 6 1/2 weeks before the date of issue.

In a session with Otto Fuerbringer on Time's magazine development, Money editor William Rukeyser and People's Richard Stolley talked about their brief experiences on their new magazines. "Money's original idea was not to be dependent on advertising and have a higher sale price but when the advertisers came in, we lowered the price. We're talking to young and middle-aged middle class families and assume they have no special knowledge of our whole field of family finance, gambling and travel," Rukeyser said.

"People is the 'hot' magazine right now," Stolley said. "We're being talked about and quoted and newspapers are beginning to imitate us with new people sections. Although we're selling a million copies a week now--about 60 percent of our readers are women who buy us at supermarkets--we're not in the black yet. We're read cover to cover because our stories are never more than two pages long and are in part told

with photos. We plan to stick with black-and-white because color would distract from the facial expressions. TV spots on the Today and Tonight shows have helped sell magazines, which will perish in six days. Tatum O'Neal has been our best selling cover and J. Paul Getty has been the worst," he said grinning.

Fuerbringer said Money and People were created after a test about three years ago in which brochures describing each of four magazines were sent out to about 125,000 names in a sample and then the responses evaluated.

In the only behind-the-scenes action of the week, Time assistant managing editor Richard Seamon held an editorial makeup conference in which back-of-the-book editors were called in to describe available pictures and stories for each section. The conferences went smoothly and little copy was "greened," as they say, or trimmed to fit.

Across the street, McGraw-Hill is the quintessential business publisher with 36 magazines and 20 newsletters in its stable as well as a host of other media activities. The combined circulation volume of their publications earns McGraw-Hill the claim to the largest publisher title. Unlike other shops, the emphasis was on the business and production side of publishing since the editorial content of their publications appeals only to specialized audiences.

Vice-president Walter Stanbury, who issued copies of the annual report to visiting faculty, noted that 80 percent of their publications division income of $130 million was derived from advertising and only 20 percent came from circulation. Stanbury noted that economies such as using lightweight paper, reducing trim size and pre-sorting were being instituted to meet rising costs. "The philosophy of big gross circulations has gone by the board because of the expense of getting that circulation and servicing it. We're raising subscription prices and asking readers to help cover cost increases. So far, there's been little resistance and we've only lost fringe readers," he said.

President John Emery was even more candid. "One trend is to get the premium subscription price out of the reader. Though all of the eight new magazines we started last year have controlled circulation, paid circulation may be the trend of the next five years. Ideally subscription revenue pays for production of the magazine plus editorial costs, so advertising and marketing, then, are all on top." Emery also said McGraw-Hill was now involved in other information projects such as electronic data banks, seminars, trade shows and newsletters.

The McGraw-Hill editorial staff includes a mix of journalists and technical writers, Mr. Stanbury added, because engineers lack the skill for digging out stories and journalists lack technical expertise. He also said the company had an active program for journalism trainees (math and science backgrounds are preferred) in which trainees spend nine months learning about three different periodicals before joining the staff. Applications from recent graduates were welcome.

In a tour of the offices, Anderson Ashburn of American Machinist (and chairman of ASME) took us through the World News Bureau--80 staff members in 18 foreign and domestic bureaus and 150 stringers elsewhere--enroute to the computer typesetting rooms, where the process of setting a Business Week story was carefully outlined and demonstrated. In a three-shift, 24-hour a day, 5 days a week operation, all McGraw-Hill copy is set and stored on magnetic tape, justified and corrected automatically and then transmitted by phone to the printers.

Later Howard Cohen of Medical World News told how his editors try to find doctors' angles on all kinds of stories and present both sides of a story without being an advocate for either. The point was obvious: the magazine should make its editorial position known but not become "super-juries" on issues since readers are professionals and as educated as editors.

John Emery also explained how editors were encouraged to explore new publishing ventures. "Because of the current corporate climate, we have to risk failure,"

he said, "though most projects have succeeded." Walter Wagner of Architectural Record cited as an example the 16 books that have been spun off from the editorial content of his magazine.

Editor's editor Hubert Luckett of Popular Science began our final day's sessions by explaining how his magazine had been restructured to meet the needs of his technologically oriented readers. The three editorial subdivisions are science and engineering, consumer information and reader activities (or product use). Luckett said the group editors shift around on different types of stories because it improved performance and gave them job satisfaction. Almost all of the 30 staff members attend the monthly editorial planning sessions, Luckett said, pulling on his ever-present pipe. He and his staff generate about 90 percent of the stories in the magazine either from reading trade publications and professional journals, attending symposia or from personal contacts. "We're usually already working on stories that free lancers suggest," he said, "though we often do accept local stories that are suggested." Another facet of his editorial thoroughness is Luckett's copy checking method. "We send copy to technical authorities in the field and ask them, as a courtesy, to review the copy and phone if there are any glaring errors. There's no payment to these people but the cooperation has been good," he said.

Nothing goes into the magazine without Luckett's approval, so a series of preprinted forms for planning and logging story ideas, copy, art, and layout are used. As each page of the issue being prepared is completed a photostated copy of the layout is tacked to his office wall so he can keep up with the progress of each part of the issue.

"The skilled blue collar worker--a now decreasing market--was our prime target, but we're also interested in the man in white coveralls who's running a computer rather than a lathe. So we're refocusing the magazine to this new reader. As we've

changed the editorial content, our demographics have improved," Luckett went on. "Each month we send out 1100 questionnaires to a random sample of readers and I personally read the readers' responses as well as every letter-to-the-editor that comes in. It's a good way to know your reader."

Chet Fish, editor of the Times-Mirror's Outdoor Life, said he got hooked on outdoor magazines when he did his master's thesis on the field. Fish briefly described some of the staples and changes in his publication: a conservation column, articles on recreation vehicles ("there are some aspects we don't like so we comment on those"), field guide tips in a special section designed to be torn out and saved, and 8-page regional inserts, a recent innovation that requires 48 additional pages of copy each issue for its six regions.

Above his desk, Fish has a magnetic board with two years of the magazine always on view--last year and next year's plans. "In a year, we'll use about 144 features which will be about half free lance and half staff written. We get about 25 unsolicited manuscripts a day but prefer to work on queries. We also have regional editors," he said.

"The 'me and Joe' stories, the lowest form of outdoor writing, are a good way to get information across while entertaining the reader. The narrative approach can be a subtle technique for communicating other things. I'd rather have stories about real people who did something somewhere at a specific time," Fish concluded.

Golf Magazine editor John Ross admitted that 37 percent of his editorial content was devoted to tips, advice and techniques of the sport but that there was now an effort to broaden the editorial base by including recipes and stories on investment, photography and other interests. "When Sports Illustrated expanded its editorial base, it became successful," Ross said. With a current circulation of 500,000 he obviously hopes to compete with magazines other than Golf Digest and his

newly designed logo, cover lines and wider range of stories are evidence of that goal.

Robert Cole, vice-president of circulation, said Times-Mirror subscriptions were fulfilled by the A.C. Nielsen firm in Boulder, Colorado. Nielsen sends the cards to three small towns in Ireland to be processed because labor is cheaper there he said.

Pete Calvo, head of production, noted that enlarging the size of Popular Science made sense economically since the magazine now used fewer pages of a larger size. He also said that his bindery was now delivering magazines to the post office on wooden pallets instead of in mail bags to expedite handling and reduce costs.

Participating faculty members also had some ideas worth mentioning. Professor Harold Buchbinder of Boston University suggested that ASME take in faculty as associate members to help improve communications between editors and journalism schools and consider having faculty summer interships on magazines, similar to ones currently available to students. Another idea presented to ASME was the creation and distribution to editors of a list of all journalism schools with magazine courses (and contacts at each) so editors traveling in the area could visit schools and give guest lectures or just visit with students when possible.

Two points, both well known, were reinforced from the discussions with editors: successful magazines are run by businessmen or women first and editors second; and the best editors have strong personalities which pervade their operation and product.

I'll make no attempt to summarize any of the other divergent points discussed during the week except to say the ASME Journalism Educator Seminar turned out to be quite a useful refresher magazine course for those who admittedly hadn't been through New York shops in years while those with specific concerns--whether a

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analyzing new production processes or establishing ties with editors--also seemed satisfied.

List of participants:

ASME: Anderson Ashburn, editor of American Machinist and chairman of ASME
Ruth Whitney, editor of Glamour and vice charrman of ASME
Geraldine Rhoads, editor of Woman s Day
Robert Lubar, managing editor of Fortune
Hubert Luckett, editor of Popular Science
Robert E. Kenyon Jr., secretary of ASME

Faculty: Louis Alexander, University of Houston
Harold Buchbinder, Boston University
J. Ross Baughman, Kent State University (teaching fellow)
Junetta Davis, University of Oklahoma
John W. English, University of Georgia
Derry Eynon, Colorado State University
George Hage, University of Minnesota
Richard D. Hoyt, University of Maryland
John H. Schact, University of Illinois
Elizabeth Yamashita, Northwestern University

MPA: Stephen E. Kelly
Robert Goshorn
Marvin Gropp
William H. Paul
Robert C. Gardner